

ABSTRACT

Station Eleven by Emily St. John Mandel and *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood both serve as different representations of how women in fictional apocalypses can exist and what that can mean.

These novels, written by women, are similar in that they both focus on the epidemic as a motif and utilize a similar narrative structure, but each presents a different type of epidemic and depiction of women.

Though there are many theories about what an apocalypse can actually be, generally accepted is Tessa Heffernan's theory from *Post Apocalyptic Culture*, in which the end is "the unveiling and revelation of the ancient truth of man, which promises to restore life, feeling, vitality, warmth, touch, the body, and sensuality to humanity—what has traditionally been associated with the feminine" (130). *Station Eleven* functions as a novel that represents women as they truly are: multifaceted. *Oryx and Crake*, in many ways, presents the complete opposite. Its female characters are pigeonholed into certain roles, and serve as secondary characters at best. Despite these variations, both works resonate with apocalyptic theory as well as ecofeminist criticism; *Station Eleven* serves as a representation of how a natural phenomenon can decimate humanity, and yet women can rise just as the Earth does, while *Oryx and Crake* can demonstrate how both women and nature can play the submissive role in a literary work.

INTRODUCTION

An apocalypse is generally defined and accepted as an event that brings about the end of the world, as it has been depicted in popular culture. From its origin in ancient Greek, the apocalypse or the *apokalypsis* "is literally understood as a revelation or unveiling of the true order" (Heffernan 4). Discussing the apocalypse as a motif in 20th century literature, Frank Kermode suggests, "No longer imminent, the end is immanent" (68), meaning that the end by an apocalypse is not imminent, as in about to happen, but immanent, as in completely natural. Kermode goes on to explain that stories about the end of the world, like the literature of an epidemic, help us to understand our place in the world, as our ends are a natural part of existence, and in accordance with its Greek roots, can reveal the true order of the world. In the case of *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel and *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood, these fictional apocalypses, though similar in nature, serve as very different examples of what post-apocalyptic fiction can represent, specifically to women's representation, and revealing their true order.

Both novels have received high recognition in the literary community, despite the fact that they may also be considered science fiction, which typically denotes less merit. One writer for the *New York Times* suggests that, in the case of *Station Eleven*, the reason it has garnered such attention is that it focuses "on character development and relationships against the backdrop of a global calamity. The apocalypse becomes more of a setting than a plot point" (Alter 1). It is the literary merits of the work that far outweigh the other elements. Kermode asserts that apocalypse literature makes greater, common statements about human nature, and that from these we can take away comfort and lessons (8). James Berger suggests yet another theory, that literature that describes an apocalypse and its aftermath can serve many different purposes, primarily psychological or political, in that they all serve as a commentary on the social order of the world (7). In the cases of *Station Eleven* and *Oryx and Crake*, while all theories may be true, From an ecofeminist perspective, the two novels both create quite the dialogue.

Women in the Apocalypse: Power and Gender in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

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In loving memory of Diane H. Porazzo

THE NOVELS

Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven* is a story that spans over time to tell the story of how the fates of Kirsten Raymonde, Jeevan Chaudhary, Arthur Leander and Miranda Carroll connect despite the epidemic that rocks their world. In the opening scenes of the novel, Arthur Leander, a renowned actor, dies of a heart attack while on stage for a production *King Lear* in which he plays the titular role, despite Jeevan's efforts to resuscitate him, as he had been watching the play in the audience and had recently finished EMT training. Young Kirsten, who had been acting in the play as one of the King's daughters, is troubled by his death, as is Jeevan, but that worry is pushed to the side by the onset of the Georgian Flu outbreak, which decimates most of humanity. The novel jumps forward to twenty years in the future, and shows how the Earth and civilization attempt to rebuild. Kirsten moved on to wander the new territories of what's left of the United States and Canada with the Travelling Symphony, an organization that performs music and Shakespeare's plays. Meanwhile, the group is pursued by a religious fanatic known only as the Prophet while they attempt to flee to the Museum of Civilization where they believe some of their friends may have gone. Mandel also tells the story of a young woman named Miranda Carroll, set in the days before the apocalypse, as she attempts to navigate her life as a young artist. After a brief marriage to Arthur Leander, she escapes the spotlight by throwing herself into her work as a shipping specialist while working obsessively on her graphic novel *Station Eleven* on the side. The narrative switches back and forth between the days before the outbreak, of Arthur and Miranda's life, as they struggle to understand their places in the world as we know it, to the future, as Kirsten and others fight for survival and normalcy in a world that is so very foreign.

Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* focuses primarily on the protagonist, Snowman, or as he was known in his youth, Jimmy. Jimmy's story begins as a young child living with his parents, when Jimmy eventually meets another boy his age named Glenn. Glenn and Jimmy quickly become best friends, and together navigate their strange world, together enjoying games like Extinctathon, and watching explicit and violent videos online. As adults, the two work together, and Glenn, who now goes by the name Crake, is a genographer who has created beings nicknamed "Crakers": humanoids that are both docile, easy to control, and what Crake claims to be the early models of a project that would allow parents to pick and choose the genes that they want to pass on to their children. Jimmy takes on the name "Snowman" as he joins this team. There he also meets a woman named Oryx, a now adult version of the young girl that Jimmy had been so obsessed with in the child pornography videos he and Crake used to watch. Now, however, through an arrangement at the Watson-Crick Institute, Crake has poached her from the sex work industry and she works as a teacher for the Crakers, educating them with what they need to know to survive in their specially tailored biome called Paradise. Much to Jimmy's chagrin, Crake and Oryx are also dating, though Oryx does see Jimmy romantically and sexually on the side. Between them is the implication that she remains with Crake to assist him sexually so that he may move forward in his bioengineering more successfully, and hints that he may be aware of her and Jimmy's arrangement. As the Crakers grow and learn under Oryx and Crake's care, Jimmy works publicly with Crake's secondary project, a pill named BlyssPlus. Through a massive defect in the BlyssPlus pills, an epidemic quickly wipes out its users. This narrative is interspersed with another narrative that tells the story of an older Jimmy, referred to by his old nickname, Snowman, as he navigates life in a world where he believes himself to be the only human survivor. He struggles to survive dealing with the elements, wildlife, and most crushing, his guilt of the deaths he helped to facilitate, all while watching over the Crakers. Snowman tries his best to survive against illness, the wilderness, and his own memories.

ECOFEMINIST THEORY

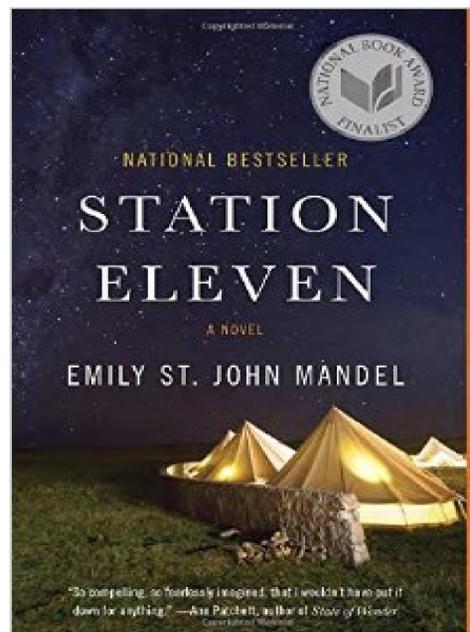
The novels in terms of ecofeminist theory are both unique in their treatment of female characters. On a basic level, ecofeminist theory can be illustrated as the principle that the issue of women's rights is connected to the ecology of the Earth, and both are oppressed by a patriarchal society. Ecofeminism also makes the argument that for the issue of the divide between humanity and nature would be best solved by womankind and their innate knowledge. The characters of *Oryx and Crake* are primarily male, and as the novel's plot relies on the gene splicing of animals, humans, and even viruses many of the issues it brings up are ecofeminist ones. When it is revealed at the end of the novel that the failure of the BlyssPlus pills and the following epidemic were at least in part intentional, Snowman can only watch as the world is essentially wiped clean of humanity and left to start over with the Crakers, who naturally have a great respect for each other, especially to the women, who are instilled with an innate spiritual knowledge that they believe is essential for their own survival, but also respect for the Earth and all its creatures. *Station Eleven* serves more as an example of ecofeminism working in favor of the female characters, in that they connect more to the Earth; Kirsten Raymonde, and Miranda Carroll, the novel's two main heroines, remain in tune with nature throughout. Kirsten fights for survival in the wilderness and is often able to sense danger before it comes, while Miranda's heart belongs in the undersea of her *Station Eleven* work and when she succumbs to the Georgian Flu herself, she is drawn to the sea and the sunset in her last moments. The plagues of both *Station Eleven* and *Oryx and Crake* are also ecofeminist in that they wipe the planet of civilization and allow nature to take back the Earth.

CONCLUSION

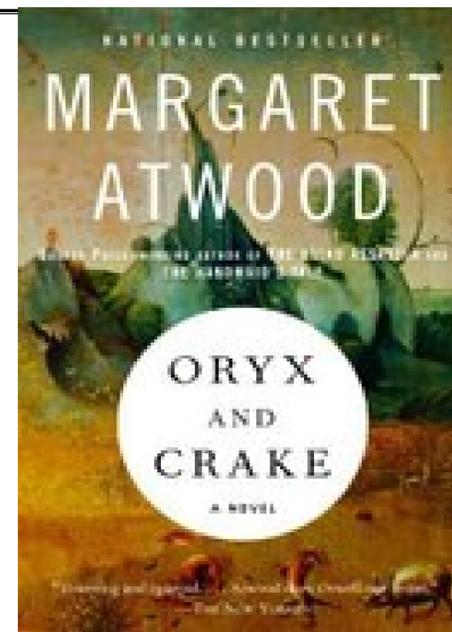
Apocalyptic literature, film, and television in popular culture often feature the idea of a widespread illness or some sort of cataclysmic natural disaster that forces humanity to its knees. In these types of narratives, nature striking back is a common theme. This is relevant to the ecofeminist principles that both *Station Eleven* and *Oryx and Crake* are applicable to; in short, that the Earth and its preservation is a feminist issue, and that women are both more in tune with the Earth but also that in the patriarchal society women and the Earth should be respected rather than taken advantage of. In the case of the two novels, it is the female characters who help to further this idea despite their depiction in vastly different roles. In short, *Station Eleven* and *Oryx and Crake* both serve as different interpretations of ecofeminist principles. While *Station Eleven* shows how both women and the ecology of the Earth can overcome and thrive, *Oryx and Crake* is an example of how both the Earth and women must be respected for all to thrive.

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Station Eleven written by Emily St. John Mandel, and published in 2015.



Oryx and Crake, written by Margaret Atwood and published in 2003.